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Headline: Without questioning minds, S'pore could become 'brilliant but brittle': Ho Kwon Ping

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Prominent businessman Ho Kwon Ping called on the tertiary students at his book launch event on Sept 7 to "ask why" a little more and challenge their own presumptions and assumptions.

SINGAPORE — Asserting that not enough discussions are being fuelled about where Singapore is going as a society, prominent businessman Ho Kwon Ping said that he fears his fellow citizens will "sleepwalk" into the country's next 50 years to become a "rich" and "brilliant" society that also happens to be "very brittle".

He was making the remarks on Friday (Sept 7) at the launch of his book, *Asking Why*, which was held at the Singapore Management University (SMU). Mr Ho, who is chairman of SMU and executive chairman of Banyan Tree Holdings, said: "I fear the group-think that we have in Singapore, this coddled little space where we do not question..."

"We will lack resilience, and when a severe crisis hits, we will be running around with our heads cut off, simply because of the lack of diversity."

What might have caused this "group-think" to develop? For one, the "iniquity" of the structural meritocracy which had been upheld here for decades, Mr Ho said. Over the years, it had formed a meritocratic elite that continued to perpetuate itself to a point where people in positions are coming from similar backgrounds.

Just look at the "similarities" among the line-up of Singapore's fourth-generation leadership, he added. "It is getting narrower and narrower."

To break out of it, Mr Ho called his audience of more than 100 tertiary students to "ask why" a little more and challenge their own presumptions and assumptions, which are not necessarily political in nature.

The real danger lies in young Singaporeans who grew up among the "most privileged" in the region, he noted.

Borrowing media studies professor Cherian George's analogy of Singapore being an "air-conditioned nation", Mr Ho said: "The truth of the climate outside, we don't know. It is hermetically sealed, and I think we need to break away from that."

Those who "ask why" would not always have to arrive at a "contrarian conclusion", Mr Ho insisted, saying he knows of people who question their religion and returned to their faith with far stronger convictions, for instance.

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And as a step beyond that, young people need to keep asking why. "That's the only way I think things would change anywhere, whether it be in Singapore, or in the world of science, where a persistence in questioning certain accepted orthodoxies led to huge changes in the way we perceive the physical world around us."

He also said that there is nothing wrong with having to put up a fight. "You have to accept that (there are people who) are there to defend the system."

Turning to the topic of entrepreneurship, Mr Ho said that young entrepreneurs should not feel guilty when they join a multi-national company after graduation. His view is that keen entrepreneurs might find value in "de-risking", such as earning their stripes in someone else's firm before they feel ready to take the leap to start their own business.

"There is an over-romanticised notion of the 20-plus-year-old entrepreneur going into their proverbial garages and (make it) straightaway and become Steve Jobs or Bill Gates," Mr Ho said.

In telling his own success story of how he transformed a disused tin mine in Phuket, Thailand into a resort in 1994, he said the irony is that there is merit in "sheer ignorance" as well.

"I had never been to business school. I had never even heard of 'due diligence'... I had no choice. We found out that it was completely polluted. And with no choice, you basically wing it as you go along... That's very often the source of entrepreneurship.

"Knowing too much sometimes leads to inaction. Now, if you were to ask me if I would had taken the risks I had taken earlier, I probably wouldn't. I will be able to argue myself out of it."